

ONE

The hovercraft was nearing the end of its klick (hour) long trip from the university into the forest preserve. It was halfway through the local winter period or roughly Late January or early February if this was Terra instead of the other Earth. Aldin was still trying to get use to this Earth's different calendar of ten months of 35 days each versus the twelve months of 30 to 31 days each and that odd one with 28 days back on Terra. At the moment, it didn't really matter to him. What mattered was on this trip his task was to locate the butternuts he had buried the previous fall to demonstrate his memory skills and sense of smell and get filmed, well, digital recorded doing these tasks. The side bonus was he was going to get to keep those nuts. Well, at least those he didn't nibble on immediately. He was looking forward to this day as he had developed a fond taste for butternuts.

It had snowed the night before, which showed little sign of disturbance as the hovercraft passed over it. The vehicle finally slowed to a stop, and settled gently on top of the snow. The hovercraft's dome partially slid back to allow the door to open. Aldin leapt out. "I'm going to get a quick climb in and stretch my limbs while you set-up the equipment, Karle. I'll be back in 5 min...er...9 to 10 ceklicks." Aldin mentally kicked himself as he looked back to the skunk. After all this time, he should have been able to do the conversion to this world's time units without a problem. It was easier here once you got used to it, everything, including time was metric based. He looked to the larger squirrel, "Want to join me, Giguere?"

"I'll pass," he stated as he started to assist Karle unload gear from the hovercraft. "With two of us, it won't take as long to set-up."

"And I'd just be in the way being a small, wild cousin-size squirrel."

"We've been through this before, Ambassador. Go have your climb. Just go," Karle made shoeing motions with his hands.

Aldin was too excited to correct Karle, who kept insisting on using his title instead of his name. "Thanks!" He called out as he quickly raced up the nearest tree. The trees in the preserve were so huge compared to those back near the university. When he finally reached near the top, he looked down at the tiny specs the two graduate students had become. This tree had to be 80 mits (meters) or more in height. There was nothing this size back where he came from at Maine's Nahmakanta Public Reserve back on Terra to compare it to. He had read of huge trees out on the west coast of North America, but had never been there. Maybe these were like those. Though he doubted they could see him, he waved and then in one smooth motion, ran out on a branch, leapt, and easily cleared the distance to the next tree. He had no worry about a drop from that height, as deadly as it would be if somehow he missed. It was second nature to simply make the jump. The new branch sagged slightly under his landing, as expected, causing a little snow to slough off the branch. This started a cascade of snow on its way to the forest floor. Karle and Giguere had to

duck into the hovercraft to keep from getting hit by the dropping snow, not that it would have really harmed them as it was light, fluffy snow.

Aldin saw this from far above and gigglechittered even though he knew the two would probably be upset with him when he finished the climb down. They really needed to loosen-up a bit. He was starting to get Giguere to do so, but Karle was different. Oh well. It wasn't like he knew any smart skunks back on Terra before he had crossed over to this Earth. So who knows? Maybe Earth wild skunks here were naturally uptight. Aldin started down the second tree, muzzle-first, like any squirrel. As promised he was back within 10 ceclicks.

Aldin was handed a small combination earbud and microphone that slipped into his left ear. He attached a tiny camera on his back that looked over his shoulder. The Velcro-like underside stuck to his fur. It could also be easily removed without pulling the fur. There was a brief sight and sound check of the equipment. Karle started up a camera drone. This was a new one compared to what they had previously used. Aldin stared at it, cocking his head one way and then the other way.

"Maybe the headphone is messing with my hearing, Karle. I can't hear that drone. It's not like the one you used last fall. That one was as noisy as the ones we had on Terra."

Karle nodded. "No more angry, stinging insect noise. We got an upgrade from an older quadcopter to a hoverdrone."

Aldin stood there a moment staring at the drone and then looking around. "You did park the hovercraft in the same place as last fall, right?"

"Yes," Giguere replied. "We know that is important for you as a reference point in the nut search."

"Then something's not right. I know I buried a nut at this spot, but I don't smell anything. If there was still a nut below me, I should smell it. I've never asked how strong your sense of smell is, Giguere. For comparison, I can smell food through a third of a mit of soil and close to a mit of snow. There isn't that much snow on the ground." He shook his head a moment and then stuck his nose into the top layer of the snow sniffing and then looked up again. "I don't smell the butternut I stored here. Please, check the mapping software that marked where I buried nuts for confirmation that this is one of the spots." Aldin closed his eyes briefly in thought slowly wigwagging his tail back and forth. "I take back what I said before about a nut. If I remember correctly, I buried three here because the stems were stuck together."

Giguere looked to Karle who was already tapping away on his handheld flatpanel, this Earth's combination computer and communication/cellphone-like smart device about the same size as a larger smart phone, but much more powerful. "He's right, there should be 3 butternuts below him."

“I’ll dig down and confirm they’re gone.” Aldin quickly went to work digging down through the snow with his forepaws until only part of his hind legs and tail remained above. His tail flicked about a bit before he resurfaced, shaking snow from his head and nose. In his mouth was part of a butternut shell, which he took into his paws to exam, holding it slightly to one side and then the other as directly in front of his nose was a natural blind spot. “No nuts, just shell fragments.” He scampered over to the hovercraft and handed it up for Giguere and Karle to examine. “You can see it was cracked open with incisors similar in size to mine.”

After examining the fragment, the two graduate students looked at each other and then at Aldin. The way they looked at him made him take step back.

“What?” (tailtwitch)

“Did you come back here on your own last fall?”

(negative flick) “Of course not. I know how important this research is. As tempted as I was to return and gather butternuts, I behaved. If I had had the time there are other places I could have gone to gather some to take home.”

“Well, let’s see if any of the other nearby nuts are still there,” Karle stated.

Spot after spot turned up nothing, except the occasional shell fragment. It was disheartening to Aldin. If it weren’t for Karle confirming each empty spot and those fragments, Aldin would have started to question his own memory. After half a klick, Karle called a stop to the search.

“It’s just as I feared,” Karle spoke. “Despite our best efforts to ensure this was an unclaimed territory, it has a wild cousin squirrel in it or had one sometime last fall after we did our filming.”

“Wouldn’t we have spotted it if it was here last fall?” Giguere questioned.

“With the noise the old drone made, never mind my antics having just gotten the cast off my arm at that time?” Aldin chimed in and shook his head negatively. “Not likely.” He paused a moment in thought before continuing. “Then again, I do not know the behavior of your wild cousin squirrels. I can only go on what I know from back on Terra where they avoided my kind. I think it is because we do not smell right to them. The noise of the old drone would have scared them away back home, also. But who knows how it is here, right?”

“So, this trip and all our work since last fall is a bust,” Giguere moaned.

Karle simply nodded in reply.

“You are going to give up just like that?” Aldin chided. “It snowed last night, and so far, the only small pawprints I have seen have been those I made. If there is still a wild cousin about, should not there be tracks between trees in a few spots? Perhaps you could send your new drone to scout around a little. See if you can find some tracks. That will not turn-up our lost nuts, but it would answer whether or not a wild cousin is still here.”

Karle agreed and started the drone on a survey pattern to look about in an outward spiral. Once it reached a distance of 250 mits, it would automatically return to the hovercraft.

“There are a couple more stashes I’d like to try, including a hollow a couple of trees over that way.” Aldin pointed to the east with his tail.

“Go ahead, but be careful.”

Aldin scampered off to the east and began climbing a tree. About 20 mits up, he reached the hollow. He sniffed around the entrance before poking his head in. An LED on his shoulder camera automatically turned on. Like all the other stashes he had searched, this one was empty. He drooped his tail in disappointment. He pulled his head out and clung there on the side of the tree for a moment his ears quivering. Yes, that was scrabbling he heard on the trunk above him and getting louder fast. Instinct made him scramble around the trunk just before he heard, “INTRUDER! GO! GO! GO! MINE!” barked loudly in chitterspeak by a wild cousin squirrel who was quickly on his tail. Down and around the trunk, Aldin scrambled rapidly with the other squirrel trying to nip at his tail.

“I leave! Not know you claim this territory!” he called back in chitterspeak as he fled down the trunk with the other close behind him. It kept up the same intruder-leave call as it chased him.

Aldin quickly reached the snow covered forest floor with the other squirrel still close on his tail. Before Karle and Giguere could react Aldin leapt into the hovercraft (chittering) back at the other squirrel. It leapt in behind him and skidded to a halt when it noticed the strange smells and saw the larger squirrel and skunk.

It screeled loudly in terror chirping its warning in chitterspeak, “BIGGENS! RUN!” It turned, scrabbling on the smooth floor of the hovercraft and leapt. It fled towards the nearest tree. “TRUCE! RUN! BIGGENS! DANGER!!! PREDATORS!!! RUN!!!” it barked rapidly as it fled.

The wild cousin’s call of predator and danger overwhelmed Aldin and his instincts won out. He, too, scrabbled out the hovercraft barking the same cry in chitterspeak, “PREDATORS! RUN!” He quickly followed the other up the tree while his two companions stared. Giguere’s tail swished about in warning from the cry, but he didn’t give into the call though he began to shake.